

## **The educative relationship in primary school: aggressive tendencies and pro-social behaviour**

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The general objective of this work is to analyze how pupils' aggressive tendencies and pro-social behaviour can influence the perception of a given educative relationship, both from the point of view of the pupil and of the teacher. This study shall focus particularly on aggressive tendencies and pro-social behaviour envisaged as indicators of social adaptation's capability. The research has been conducted on a sample of 249 pupils and 30 teachers, belonging to 15 primary school classes in the province of Turin. Both teachers and pupils agree that children with difficulties of social adaptation appear to maintain less positive relationships: their lower pro-social behaviour matches lack of closeness in relationships and the increase of affective distance within them. Moreover, augmented aggressive tendencies have been discovered among pupils with higher levels of conflict. This research shall highlight how the social and anti-social modalities of interaction of a child may influence a teacher's perception of their relationship, much more than the pupil's evaluation of his or hers cognitive abilities. For what concerns the association between relationship and capability of adaptation, it shall be first shown how the pupil tends to view himself or herself as a more or less pro-social and antisocial individual; then, how such perception influences the pupil's connection with the teacher. At the same time, it shall be given evidence of how the teacher tends to judge the bond with a pupil on the basis of the mental image he or she has created of the child and of which the child may not be entirely aware.

*Key words:* Educative relationship, teacher-pupil, aggressiveness, pro-social behaviour.

*La relación educativa en la escuela primaria: tendencias agresivas y comportamientos prosociales.* El objetivo general del trabajo es el de estudiar la influencia que la tendencia agresiva y el comportamiento prosocial del alumno, considerados como indicadores de la capacidad de adaptación social, pueden ejercitar sobre la percepción de la relación educativa, según los docentes y los alumnos. La investigación se ha realizado sobre una muestra formada por 249 alumnos y 30 docentes, pertenecientes a 15 grupos de primaria de la provincia de Turín. Tanto los profesores como los alumnos, reconocen que es más probable que los niños con dificultad de adaptación social, mantengan relaciones menos positivas: a un bajo comportamiento prosocial corresponden relaciones de menor proximidad y tendentes a reforzar las distancias; a la tendencia agresiva se le asocian unos mayores niveles de conflicto. Las modalidades de interacción antisociales del niño, influyen en la percepción que tiene el profesor de la calidad relacional más de lo que puedan influir las evaluaciones de la capacidad cognitiva conseguida por el alumno. En lo que concierne a las asociaciones entre la relación y la capacidad de adaptación, el alumno tiende a relacionarse con el profesor a través de su propia imagen, como sujeto más o menos prosocial o antisocial; al mismo tiempo, el docente juzga la relación en base a la imagen que se ha representado mentalmente del alumno, a menudo caracterizada por apreciaciones que el mismo alumno no reconoce.

*Palabras clave:* Relación educativa, docente-alumno, agresividad, comportamiento prosocial.

During the first years of schooling, the relationship between pupil and teacher is paramount for the child's socio-emotional development (Berch and Ladd, 1998), both for his or hers learning path (Pianta and Steinberg, 1992) and his or hers behavioural habits' orientation (Jackson 1998). It is evident that educational relationships in school perform a cushioning role protecting the child against the risk of maladjustment (Pianta, Steinberg and Rollins, 1995; Howes, Matheson and Hamilton, 1994): a satisfactory relationship with the teacher may ameliorate the pupil's behavioural habits by diminishing the dangers associated with aggressiveness, and by increasing his or hers relational skills, thus possibly improving the quality of future interactions (Howes and Hamilton, 1992).

On the other hand, the pupil's aggressiveness and pro-social behaviour are significantly influential habits, especially in regard of the teacher's idea of the child, and of the quality of their relationship (Pianta, 1999). Some authors maintain the educational relationship between teacher and pupil creating maladjusted behaviours is influenced by distinctive variables, such as the child's sex and his or hers school performance (Blankemeyer, Flannery and Vazsonyi, 2002). Additionally, other studies underline the predicting role of social adaptation's indicators on said school performance: the analysis of related criticism accentuates significant links of productivity with aggressive tendencies, criminal conduct and pro-social behaviour (Caprara and Bonino, 2006).

The following study proposes to examine the point of view of both teacher and pupils, taking into particular account the interpersonal dimension of aggressive (Masala, Petretto, Preti, Miotto and Stella, 2001), pro-social (Pistorio and Baumgartner, 2005; Sorrenti, Staropoli and Cedro, 2005) and relational (Hinde, 1979) conduct. Such analysis shall be based on the ideas of those authors who highlighted the discrepancy between evaluations given by an external observer (i.e. a teacher) and the judgement the pupil may offer of him or herself.

Indeed, the general goal of this work is to study the influence possibly exerted by a child's aggressive tendencies and pro-social behaviour on the perception of the educational relationship between pupil and teacher, from the point of view of both parts. To achieve this goal, some characteristics of the pupil, of schooling life and their possible sway on the perception of fundamental behavioural skills from both child and teacher shall be analysed: it has to be borne in mind how such characteristics are vital to the adaptation to a schooling context.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The study has been made on a sample of 249 pupils and 30 teachers, belonging to 5 First Grade, 5 Second Grade and 5 Third Grade classes in two Primary Schools on the province of Turin. The opinion of two educators per each has been collected, giving a final total of 481 pupil-teacher relationships analyzed. The age of the children taken into account oscillates between 6 and 10 years ( $M= 7.54$ ,  $s.d.=1.04$ ). The 52.6% ( $N=131$ ) of the evaluated children is male; the remnant 47.4% ( $N=118$ ) is female. Every teacher has been asked to assess the commitment and the performance of all pupils, according to a Likert scale of five positions (excellent, good, sufficient, not sufficient, failed): commitment and performance have been considered of high level with a ratio of 81.3% and 82.3 % respectively (excellent or good). The questionnaires have been compiled chiefly by the two teachers who spend more hours with the children (70% of teachers spend between 15 and 21 weekly hours in each class, 20% between 8 and 14).

### *Procedure*

This study began with a series of three self-evaluating questionnaires on social adaptation, submitted collectively to all pupils, who successively took the graphic test “self-teacher”, followed by an interview; teachers compiled anamnestic tests, three hetero-evaluating tests on the social adaptation of pupils and the analysis of the pupil-teacher relationship; all drawings collected through the graphic test are codified.

### *Instruments*

In order to investigate both pupils and teachers’ perception of a child’s adaptation skills, this study relied on three measurement unities created by Caprara, Pastorelli, Barbaranelli and Vallone (1992), essential both self and hetero evaluation:

1. *Physical and Verbal Aggressiveness* (PVA): it measures one’s propensity to commit aggressive acts, both of physical and verbal nature (assaults, fights; insults).
2. *Pro-social Behaviour* (PB): it measures one’s propensity to manifest behaviours addressed towards helping other individuals and sharing objects and experiences.
3. *Emotional Instability* (EI): it measures the tendency to feel uneasy, inappropriate, vulnerable, as an expression of lack of self-control on an emotional and behavioural level.

As means of investigation of educative relationships the following instruments have been used:

-For the teacher, the *Student-Teacher Relationship Scale* (Pianta, 1994) in its undergoing Italian edition (Fraire, Longobardi and Sclavo, 2006): the text aims to clarify the teacher's representation of his or her relationship with a given pupil. Twenty-eight items, which relate to three distinct dimensions of the relationship, form the scale: *Conflict*, *Closeness* and *Dependence*. The sub-category of *Conflict* refers to the negative aspects of the relationship, such as coldness or hostility, as perceived by the teacher; that of *Closeness* measures the perception of a positive relationship, founded on mutual trust and characterized by significant communication; finally, the dimension of *Dependence* considers how much a pupil relies on the teacher, and how the latter envisage such dependency.

-For the pupil, the graphic method *Relationship Self-Teacher*, designed by Bombi and Pinto (2001). Each child is asked to visually represent himself or herself with one teacher in two very definite moments of harmony and disharmony. Once the drawings are completed, every pupil has been briefly interviewed, in order to identify causes and emotional concomitants related to the various situations taken into account. All illustrations have been codified according to given indications and emphasized, for the 488 drawings collected, the following dimensions: *type of drawing*, *emotive background*, *perturbation*. The extra scales of *cohesion*, *distancing*, *similarity* and *value* have been detected on 259 drawings within the entire sample of 488.

*Cohesion* expresses the strength of the bond, the degree of closeness, and the level of emotional sharing between the pupil and the teacher; *distancing* underlines the pupil's sense of autonomy, which increases in case of conflict; *similarity* brings information on the psychological affinity between pupil and teacher and on the level of imitation and identification of the first towards the latter; *value*, to conclude, refers to the overall significance of the disparity of value between pupil and teacher.

## RESULTS

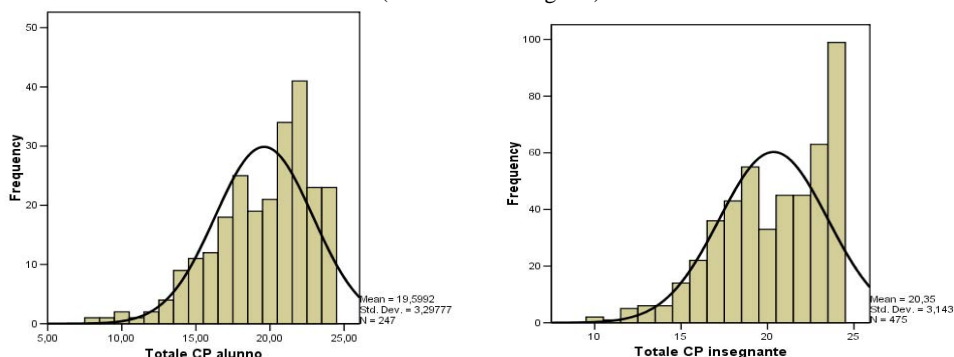
Self-evaluation and Hetero-evaluation of the social adaptation's skills of pupils.

The assessing questionnaires on the pupil's adaptation's skills stress that, for both categories of evaluators, the distribution of *pro-social behaviour* follows a regular pattern although, whilst pupils' results appear to settle around average values (Fig.1),

teachers' often present higher ones (Fig.2). In particular, teachers tend to perceive gentleness, altruism and predisposition to help much more than the pupils themselves seem to acknowledge; the pupils, on the other hand, seem to recognize more often than teachers, the need to be, also physically, in company of their peers.

Thus, teachers emerge to be more prone to recognize behavioural aspects related to the milieu of learning- teaching (helping with homework), rather than associated with a purely socializing context. This is demonstrated by the teacher's natural predisposition to recognize behaviours that may obstruct a lesson and are detected through the scale of Emotional Instability: in the eye of an adult, the educative relationship pupil-teacher develops in the specific background of school, where each pupil has precise duties and roles that need to be respected and followed, under the guide of "the one who leads", observes and evaluates.

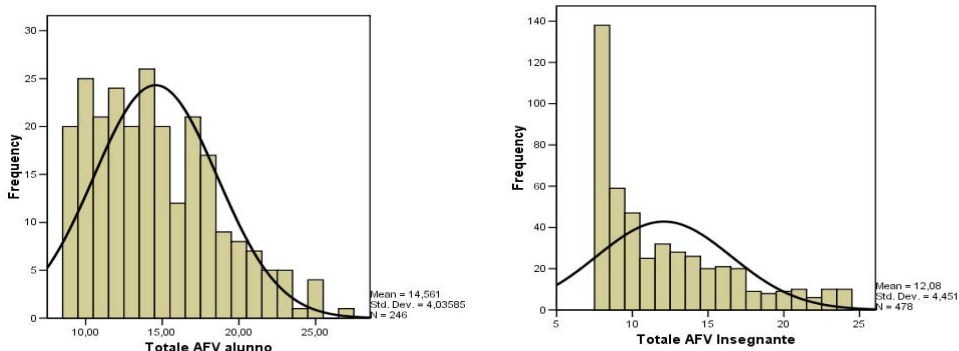
Figures 1 and 2. Distribution of self-evaluations (Fig.1, left) and hetero-evaluations (Fig.2, right) of PB. (CP in Italian diagram)



For what concerns the scores achieved in the scale of Verbal and Physical Aggressiveness, they shall strike as perceptively different: from the pupils' point of view, the sample follows a regular pattern, with values particularly relevant around the middle and the lower end of the scale (Fig.3); from the point of view of the teachers, on the contrary, the distribution is significantly out of the ordinary, as the highest value are concentrated around the below average part of the scale, especially because of very low scores given to the majority of female pupils (Fig. 4). Moreover, whilst teachers believe their pupils tend to adopt physically aggressive behaviours more frequently than expected, the pupils themselves rather recognize to engage in verbal forms of aggressiveness.

The levels of correlation between pupils and teachers on the same subject are small, yet significant: 13% of agreement on the PVA scale, and 7.3% on the PB. A minor disagreement is felt when the teacher evaluates the most aggressive pupil within a group of the same sex, whilst only one child over the four least pro-social individual in a class appears to share his teacher opinion.

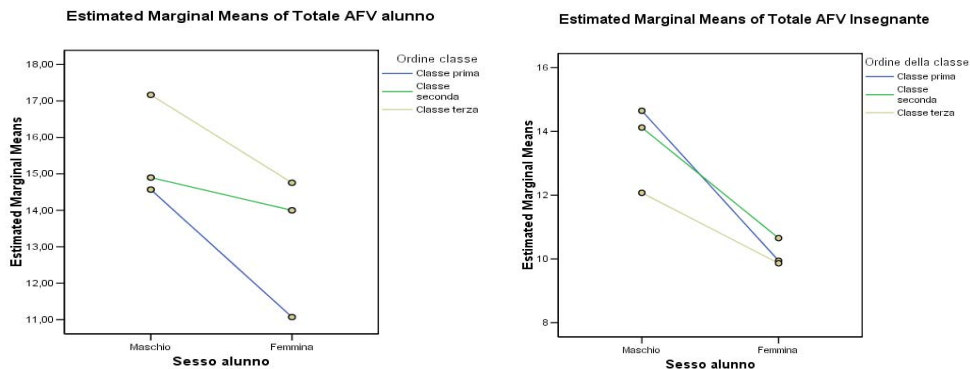
Figures 3 and 4. Distribution of self-evaluations (Fig. 3, left) and hetero-evaluations (Fig.4, right) of the PVA (AVF)



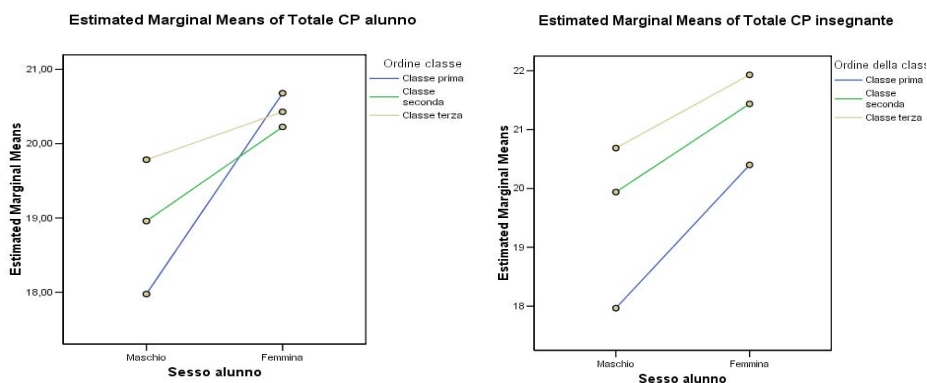
Pupils, but especially teachers, believe the sex of the pupil represents the variable influencing adaptation skills the most. Male pupils consider— and primarily appear to be considered— more aggressive (self-evaluation:  $F=12.840$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.001$ , hetero-evaluation:  $F=92.512$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and less pro-social (self-valuation:  $F=14.484$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.001$ , hetero-evaluation:  $F=48.740$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.001$ ) than female pupils, but if teachers uniformly apply such a view to all classes (Fig. 6 and Fig. 8) and to all pupils regardless to their achievement (Fig. 10 and Fig. 12), according to the pupils’ own evaluations only first grade female children (Fig. 5 and Fig. 7) and only those with high grades (Fig. 9 and Fig. 11) consider themselves more pro-social and less aggressive than their male classmates. In particular, female children believe to be less inclined to act aggressively in a direct and physical manner when compared to their male counterpart, yet they perceive themselves as capable of other forms of offense; for teachers, in contrast, female children engage very rarely in any form of aggressive behaviour.

Making the teacher aware of the role played by the variable of *sex* in determining the expectations and forms of control associated with the pupils’ social image (Caprara and Laeng, 1988) becomes of paramount importance, just as it is indispensable to understand that such expectations and forms of control are perceived differently only by younger children, who have not developed “independent morals”, yet.

Figures 5 and 6. Interaction between the sex of the pupil and the class level attended, referring respectively to self-evaluations and (Fig.5, left) and hetero-evaluations (Fig. 6, right) of the PVA (AFV)



Figures 7 and 8. Interaction between the sex of the pupil and the class level attended, referring respectively to self-evaluations and (Fig.7, left) and hetero-evaluations (Fig. 8, right) of the PVA (CP)



As a matter of fact, and as proof of the influence exercised by the class level on the perception of adaptation's skills, this study shows how older pupils tend to consider themselves more aggressive in comparison with their younger mates ( $F=8.388$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.001$ ) (Fig. 5) and declare to engage in verbally offensive conducts more often. This is in open contrast with the teachers, according to whom pupils of higher grades would represent the part of the total sample analyzed that more easily adapts to school environment ( $F=9.690$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.001$ ) (Fig. 6).

It seems the child at his or her first contact with an educational milieu tends to undergo a process of decentralization and negation, in order to give a proper image of him or herself (Caprara and Laeng, 1988); at the same time, that very child admits to engage frequently in physical forms of aggressiveness, such as kicking, punching and

being bold. These results could be validated by Bjorqvist's *et al.* (1994) between the earlier phases of psychological development and physical aggressiveness; furthermore, the same results would corroborate the link between different stages of psychological growth and the capacity of building up offensive strategies more sophisticated and less openly punishable. The older pupil, who proves to be able to express a "socially acceptable" judgement, is able to differentiate between offensive behaviours an adult would "let go" and those that are "not tolerable", hence manifesting a higher level of "mindful conscience".

Teachers recognize dissimilar stages of pro-sociality in children, depending on their age ( $F=28,864$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.001$ ), with the younger subjects less apt to employ helping behaviours; pupils, no matter of what age, are in clear opposition with this view, as they seem to believe trust and need to spend time with their peers never lacks.

If the investigated sample is subdivided into pupils with high and low productivity emerges that, according to the teachers, class evaluation plays an essential role in the children's own perception of their adaptation's skills (for the PVA:  $F=51.211$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.001$ ): within male children, those with lower productivity are more aggressive than those with high productivity ( $F=36.443$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.001$ ) (Fig. 10), and also less pro-social ( $F=30.828$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.001$ ) (Fig. 12). Male children, on the other hand, seem unconcerned with school performance while considering their tendency to be more or less aggressive (Fig. 9), although female pupils appear to take it more into account, especially when analyzing their pro-social behaviour ( $F=12.323$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.001$ ) (Fig. 11).

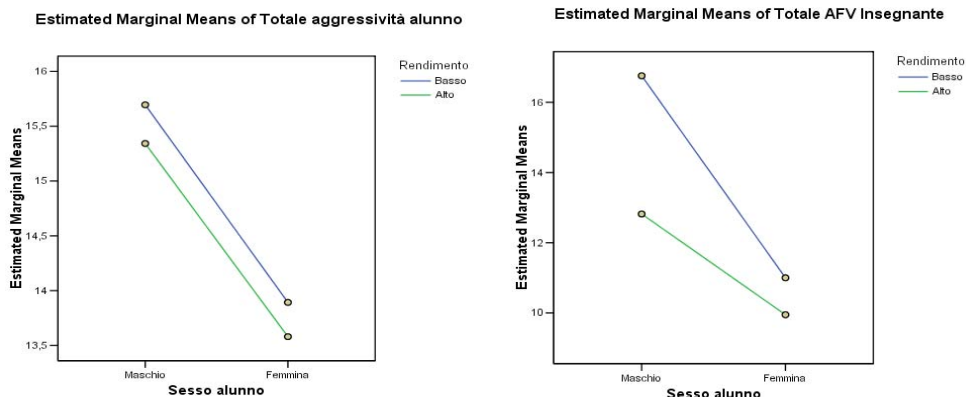
In conclusion, teachers seem to consider high productivity as a chief factor in recognizing a pupil as a-social or anti-social.

Evaluation of the influence of adaptation's skills on the educational relationship.

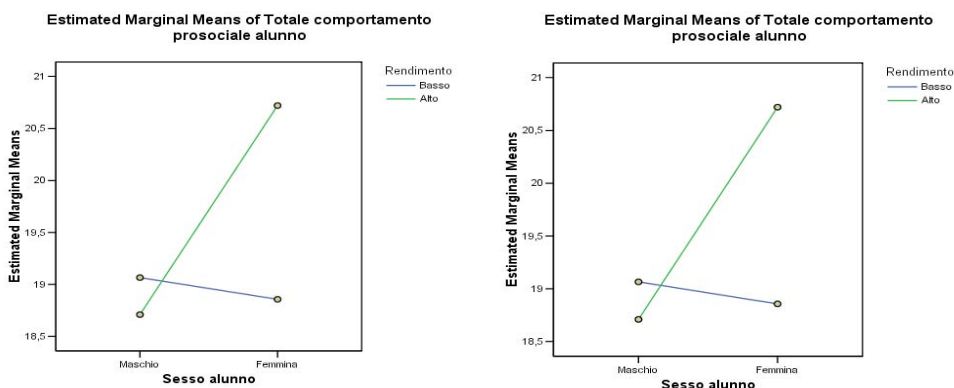
The majority of the educational relationships taken into account in this study is portrayed positively from the point of view of Closeness and with only few negative aspects. Cases in which pupils express relational difficulties with teachers—especially through the *graphic method*— are isolated and mostly associated with subjects who perceive themselves as not particularly pro-social; from the interpretation of children's drawings, it can be observed that, when the educational relationship is characterized by a moment serenity, pupils of both sexes evaluate themselves as less altruists and less likely



Figures 9 and 10. Interaction between school productivity and sex of the pupil, referring respectively to self-evaluations (Fig. 9, left) and hetero-evaluations (Fig. 10, right) of the PVA (AFV)



Figures 11 and 12. Interaction between school productivity and sex of the pupil, referring respectively to self-evaluations (Fig.11, left) and hetero-evaluations (Fig. 12, right) of the PB (CP)



to interact with their peers, as lower levels of Cohesion demonstrate ( $F=6.299$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Boys, in particular, score higher levels of Distancing ( $F=4.919$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.05$ ), where girls appear to give less relevance to their person ( $F=6.130$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

From the teacher’s point of view, the 7.3% of negative relationships (with low levels of Closeness) are significantly tied to those pupils, either female or male, who have been evaluated as not enough pro-social and more aggressive than their classmates. 5.4% of all interactions between pupil and teacher analyzed in the sample are of average intensity: such interactive modalities are linked, more often than expected, to those pupils considered a-social and to male pupils considered anti-social. Furthermore, male children with lower pro-social skills are more likely to experience educational relationships that are not entirely positive (29.7% of the cases analyzed).

The correlations between the *Total Values* of the STRS and the scores given by teachers to anti-social ( $r = -.562, p < .01$ ) and a-social conduct ( $r = .468, p < .01$ ) within their pupils, are stronger than those found between relational dimensions and didactic evaluation ( $r = .341, p < .01$ ). In particular, the most interesting, positive correlations are found between aggressive behaviour and Conflict ( $r = .539, p < .01$ ), especially while referring to male pupils with low productivity, and pro-sociality and Closeness ( $r = .479, p < .01$ ), in relation to both girls and boys. It has been noted how, in the relationship with an overly impulsive pupil—which is distinguished by greater Conflict and lesser Closeness—the teacher perceives a lesser sharing of affection and worth, higher levels of contrast, has difficulties in nurturing a harmonious relationship, feels drained, notices feelings of anger and lack of consistency in the pupil. A less sociable pupil, the teacher feels, struggles to be at ease, to understand the value of his or her relationship with the educator and to share information, feelings and experiences.

For what it concerns the interaction between *sex and the pupil's adaptation's skills*, this study discovered that, within the same range of aggressiveness, teachers consider their relationship with female pupils significantly better than those created with males (high PVA:  $F = 20.472, df = 1, p < .001$ , low PVA:  $F = 19.789, df = 1, p < .001$ ); the same can be said about pro-sociality (High PS:  $F = 37.883, df = 1, p < .001$ , low PS:  $F = 7.094, df = 1, p < .001$ ).

In all the schools this study has taken as an example, all interaction with both female and male pupils with pro-sociality issues, have been less positive than those created with their peers with better relationship skills (Males:  $F = 17.024, df = 1, p < .001$ , Females:  $F = 27.975, df = 1, p < .001$ ). For what it concerns aggressive behaviour, only male pupils appears to have difficult relationships with their teachers ( $F = 28.149, df = 1, p < .001$ ) (Table 1).

Table 1. Average of the STRS total, referring to male and female pupils, both with high and low levels of PVA and of PB

Sex	AFV	N	STRS Mean	CP	N	STRS Mean
Male	Low	180	100.07	High	190	99.32
	High	74	91.95	Low	62	92.48
Female	Low	165	104.70	High	167	105.85
	High	59	101.71	Low	55	98.22

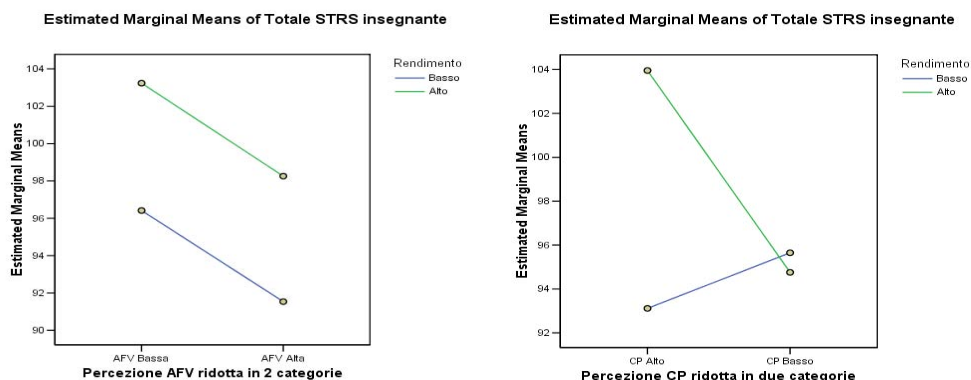
Having higher productivity, according to teachers, helps aggressive pupils to achieve positive educational relationships ( $F = 7.453, df = 1, p < .01$ ). But high productivity is by no means sufficient to endorse entirely positive relationships, if the subject does not

possess good pro-social characteristics; moreover, if the pupil does not have high productivity, his or hers adaptation's skills appear not to suffice to determine significantly the relationship in the eye of the teacher (Table 2 and Figures 13, 14).

Table 2. Average of the STRS total divided by male and female pupils with high or low productivity, and with high or low levels of PVA and PB

Sex	Rendimento	AFV	N	STRS Mean	CP	N	STRS Mean
Male	Low	Low	31	91.90	High	36	88.97
		High	30	88.70	Low	25	92.28
	High	Low	149	101.77	High	154	101.74
		High	44	94.16	Low	37	92.62
Female	Low	Low	17	104.65	High	16	102.44
		High	11	99.27	Low	12	102.67
	High	Low	148	104.71	High	151	106.21
		High	45	102.27	Low	41	96.68

Figures 13 and 14. Interaction between the pupil's productivity and PVA's levels (Fig.15, left) and levels of PB (Fig.16, right), both related to the STRS total



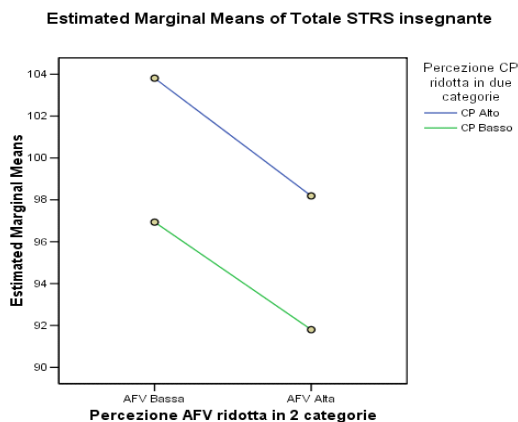
When interaction between aggressive tendency and pro-social behaviour are concerned, it appears that those pupils with lower relationship's skills and more frequent aggressive conduct can improve their position in the eye of the teacher (Fig.17) if they have, respectively, low offensive tendencies ( $F=5.052, df=1, p<.05$ ) and high pro-social abilities ( $F=6.644, df=1, p<.05$ ). It must be remembered, nevertheless, that such associations are valid only when the pupil reaches high educational productivity.

## DISCUSSION

Both teachers and pupils – also those pupils considered more aggressive and less pro-social than his or hers classmates – view the majority of educational relationships positively. Nevertheless, both sides agree in maintaining that the pupils with adaptation's

difficulties are those more likely to have less constructing relationships: to a lower pro-social behaviour correspond relationship which are less involving and inclined to reinforce distances; aggressive tendencies are associated to relationships with higher levels of conflict, but not necessarily less humane and constructive, especially in the case of girls.

Figure 17. Interaction between PB and PVA as perceived by teachers over the STRS total



A-social and anti-social interactive modalities of the child influence the teacher’s perception of the quality of the relationship, more so than the evaluation of a pupil’s cognitive capabilities.

The associations between the dimensions of educational relationship and adaptation’s skills are among the most significant, especially when comparing the scales related to the same subject: the pupil tend to built up his relationship with the teacher on the basis of the perception of him or herself as a pro-social or anti-social subject. At the same time, the teacher valued the relationship with a given pupil on the basis of the pupil mental representation of him or herself: very often such a perception is not entirely manifest to the child. It is, consequently, important for the educator to keep in mind that very often children’s idealization of their conduct may differs from theirs, as proven by the dissimilar weight of those variables which influence self and hetero measurements. Both teachers and children agrees on the relevance of sex, productivity and age in their perception of social adaptation, although such variables (gender, and level of productivity in particular) may at times act in very different measure for teachers and children, to the point they may not have, at times, relevance at all for the latter. This vision may lead the teacher to view certain behaviours of a given pupil as socially maladjusted, whilst the subject itself may not recognize them as such; in conclusion, the teacher may be misled to

create a relationship with an image of the pupil which does not correspond to reality, and which is not recognized by the child but that, if continuously reaffirmed may guide the child to recognize it, confirm it and finally adopt it.

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